

THE HOUSE OF MOHUN

By GEORGE GIBBS

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WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY

CHERRY MOHUN, up-to-date girl, bright and charming, at once attracted by DAVID SANGREE, young American ethnologist and war veteran, American by changes in manners and customs brought out by the war, but interested in Cherry. His modest funds are invested with her father.



CHAPTER XX

Work

CHERRY slept uneasily and awoke unhappy. It seemed after the interview with her mother that something vital had gone out of her life—perhaps the vestiges of youthful idealism centering around the family as a unit—the spirit of the clan. Her mother had failed them since the hour of their marriage, which seemed to have robbed her of some intrinsic quality of character that had been hers before. Cherry was startled now to discover how wide was the breach that had grown between them. Yesterday, even, she had been able to think of her mother with a smile of indulgence. Today she could think only of her father. What she had seen and felt, when she and the situation had been brutal. But her severity had been instinctive. She had no regrets for her frankness and expressed none at her breakfast table where her mother joined her. Showing, as Cherry did, the indications of a restless night. Neither alluded to their conversation, which had been so full of possibilities for even greater spiritual damage. It was her fear of this which impelled Cherry's one impulse to throw herself into her mother's arms and plead with her for the dignity of the family. But the moment passed. Alicia was wily and cold. She had the mind of a child with the manners of a woman of the world, and these had always served her with a kind of spurious dignity, impressive to those who did not know her well. It was the attitude of one above reproach intended as a rebuke to her contumacious daughter. Cherry understood and was silent. Her conscience was clear as to her visit to David's rooms, but that did not rob her mother's revelation of any of its significance. People—men—were talked about her. What hurt her more even than the knowledge that people were talking was her mother's indifference as to the facts of that visit. Any scapular had been for Alicia's riposte and she had chosen it blindly in her rage. Rather childish and silly, but none the less hurtful because of that same many years ago when she had been a spoiled little girl, alone with boys, staying out until all hours of the night, and her mother's protests had never been at the most more than a perfunctory rebuke. Cherry had already discovered that the change in their fortunes had also changed her relations with the world and the world's with her. In the halcyon days she had been merely a spoiled child, but now she was a girl with a reputation to lose. Then, she had chosen her friends carelessly and shrugged the rest of the world off of existence. Now, the world seemed to weigh more heavily in the scale against her. It shocked her to discover herself rather conspicuous against the background of her precedent. With this vision of the world of possibilities to their tongues, Cherry already stood condemned.

Fate close to be ironic. Cherry gazed into the bathroom mirror as she washed out some underclothing. It would have been funny if it weren't so serious. John Chichester had probably known of this for some weeks. Perhaps—Cherry dropped the garment with a splash, and stared at her surprised image. This morsel of gossip had reached John Chichester's ears—! This now explained why he had never proposed to her. The coincidence was startling. His attentions had suddenly ceased shortly after that visit. And David Sangree, she remembered, had fallen at about the same time under the weight of his conscience. Of course! She was almost certain now. Poor Rameses!

In her nature, relic of some forgotten Irish ancestor amenable to the humor of the paradox, a spark of movement burst forth into flame. She sank to the edge of the bathtub regarding her dripping limbs and laughed. The smallest cogwheel for humor sometimes swallows heavily in the balance against a bitterness, tipping perilously near the edge of despair. She forgot the failures of her intercourse and David's picture of her interposed and David's had been so startled when she had knocked at his door, so disturbed about his coming, so austere in his kindness. Such a lover?

And yet it was just those repressions which Cherry liked in him for they seemed the index of his character and suggested by their negative qualities a sense of force in restraint. He was so sound, so sane, and underling days helped her so much. She would have liked nothing better than to have gone to him now and unburdened herself of her new trouble. But this, of course, was impossible. She could not speak of her mother to any one. The conversation with 'Genie' had made her feel just a little awkward about talking to David, and she wondered a little at this, because as far as she could remember she had never been confident about anything. She was conscious of shades of sensitiveness with regard to David—with regard to many of her old contacts with life that she had never remembered possessing. She was learning to feel.

Her laughter, bitter as it was, gave her courage. Youth and health were in rebellion against despair. Until the present moment she had failed in everything that she had undertaken, found the true level of her incapacity—with personal problems at home that seemed even more difficult than those of her new struggle for existence. She knew now that any effort to bring her mother to her senses would be wasted—waves of appeal dashing against the rock of Alicia's ego.

But from her new rough contacts with the world she had now learned the meaning of many phrases—she knew what he meant by the game. And so after a while she sought out her father in his room. "Dad," she announced cheerfully, "I'm going to work."

Jim Mohun laid aside his pen and turned slowly in his chair. He was silent for a moment regarding her—whimsically she thought at first, then he thought of her. For the flicker of the smile at his lips meant something bright in her eyes. "Ah!" he said quietly. "When did you decide that?"

"Today—this morning—now. You

"Oh, Dad, I always loved you." He bent his head and closed his eyes. "And then one day—I woke up—the day you went on that ride with Nangree. It all came over me in a flood. The damage I'd done you in not being by you, watching your education, having a share in your thoughts—it all came to me, that Sunday—but it was too late. I knew then that Mohun & Co. were doomed; that all the things you and Bob were accustomed to would be taken away from you. Of course, I didn't know that I was going to be sick and I thought that I could pull something out of the wreck. But the worst happened."

"Oh, don't, Dad! Please!" "You, coming to what I wanted to say. It's this. No one has a right to bring children into the world unless he fits them to win their way alone and unaided—girls more than boys. The higher the type of character, the greater the obligation. I could have done a great deal with you, Cherry. You had talents. You had a good mind—too good a mind to be satisfied with the things you did—just because other girls were

doing them—silly things, foolish habits, recklessness, carelessness of public opinion. But I was weak. I listened to your mother. I just let things drift. I didn't realize how little you knew, how helpless you would be unless you married—if anything happened. Well, it did happen. Do you think you can ever forgive me?"

She caught his hand and kissed it. "I won't have you blaming yourself," she muttered. "If I'd been good for anything, I'd have made good anyway." He smiled at her. "You have made good, my dear," he said gently. "You've come through."

"I don't understand."

To be continued tomorrow

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